

## **In California, it's been all about protecting criminals over victims**

**By Andrea Seastrand**

March 02, 2018 01:44 PM

Updated 5 hours 28 minutes ago

The façade of California's soft-on-crime approach leading to safer communities is starting to crack before our eyes. At its most fundamental level, government's role is to protect public safety but unfortunately, our state seems to be forgetting this core function.

Since Gov. Brown took office, a series of criminal justice "reforms" ranging from Assembly Bill 109 to Proposition 47 to Proposition 57 have chipped away at state laws that used to protect the public. We have now reached a point where sex offenders are considered "non-violent" and will likely be [considered for early release](#) from their lengthy criminal sentences. How did California, which once passed one of the nation's toughest laws in Three Strikes, end up here?

We are already seeing the results of these disastrous policies as [both violent and property crimes](#) are up around the state for the second year in a row. In fact, violent crime is up nearly 15 percent between 2014 and 2016 and property crime is up 6 percent in the same time frame. This new trend comes after decades of declining criminal activity.

A lot of the trend we see today can be attributed to Prop 47, which in 2014 lowered penalties for drug possession, shoplifting and check forgery. On its face it sounds relatively harmless, but there have been huge side effects. For starters, this came on the back of Assembly Bill 109 passed in 2011, which already strained law enforcement resources by transferring thousands of criminals from state prisons to local jails that lacked capacity, thus resulting in the early release of thousands of inmates.

Here locally, crime is also on the rise particularly in the city of San Luis Obispo, which saw a [12.6% increase in property crimes](#) between 2015 and 2016. The city's police department believes the increase is due to Prop 47 and is caused by many criminals who would have been in prison on drug charges who are now out on the streets. They now steal with impunity to support their ongoing drug habits and law enforcement has few tools to get them to stop. It's logical to conclude that rising [homelessness across the state is likely linked to the law as well](#).

While Prop 47 was sold to the public that petty crimes shouldn't be the reason someone goes to prison, its over-simplistic argument failed to mention countless negative consequences. Prop 47 decimated drug courts where individuals could avoid being charged with a felony in exchange for completing a drug treatment program.

The ultimate irony was that it was supposed to stop prison populations from ballooning due to drug possession and instead have those people get drug treatment in the community. However, without the hammer of felony charges to keep addicts accountable, drug diversion programs have [declined](#) and now these people are back on the street

What is most concerning is that Prop 57, the most recent change in criminal law, is just starting to be fully implemented. It was approved in 2016 and gives prison bureaucrats sole discretion to shorten the sentences of felons serving long prison sentences for supposedly non-violent offenses. However, a judge ruled recently that Prop 57 was so poorly drafted that sex offenders are eligible for early release despite the governor's promise during the campaign that they would not be included.

Voters were also promised that inmates serving sentences for violent crimes would not be eligible for early release. However, in [the fine print](#) it allows them to get out of jail after their term for the violent offense is complete even if they have remaining time on their sentence for other non-violent charges. Of course things like drive by shooting and rape of an unconscious person are somehow defined as "non-violent." Once the law is fully implemented, we will have hardened criminals being released from state prison and it will certainly take its toll on public safety.

Thanks to the hard work of our men and women in law enforcement, California had long enjoyed declining crime rates. That trend is now over thanks to Prop 47 and will likely grow worse with Prop 57. Thankfully business owners, district attorneys, law enforcement and victims rights' organizations are banding together to fix some of these problems [with a voter initiative](#) that would appear on the November ballot.

Public safety is supposed to be government's top priority but lately in California, it's been all about protecting criminals over victims. That's not a sustainable policy.

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